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# Where are the logs on a Linux VPS: journalctl and /var/log

Administration & Fixes

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# Where are the logs on a Linux VPS: journalctl and /var/log

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On a Linux VPS the logs live in two places: in the **systemd journal**, read with `journalctl`, and in **files under `/var/log`**. On Debian and Ubuntu nearly everything shows up in both; on AlmaLinux and Rocky too, with different file names. To find out why a service failed, start with `journalctl -u service-name`; for what a web server or application says, go to its own file.

## journalctl, the commands you use most

| I want to see… | Command |
|---|---|
| **The last lines of one service** | `sudo journalctl -u nginx -n 50 --no-pager` |
| **Everything since the last boot** | `sudo journalctl -b` |
| **Only errors** | `sudo journalctl -p err -b` |
| **The last few minutes** | `sudo journalctl --since "30 minutes ago"` |
| **Live, while you reproduce the problem** | `sudo journalctl -u nginx -f` (Ctrl+C to leave) |
| **Kernel messages (disk, memory)** | `sudo journalctl -k` or `sudo dmesg -T` |
| **How much space the journal takes** | `journalctl --disk-usage` |

## The files in /var/log

| What | Debian and Ubuntu | AlmaLinux and Rocky |
|---|---|---|
| **General system messages** | `/var/log/syslog` | `/var/log/messages` |

| What | Debian and Ubuntu | AlmaLinux and Rocky |
|---|---|---|
| **Logins and SSH** | `/var/log/auth.log` | `/var/log/secure` |
| **Web server** | `/var/log/nginx/` or `/var/log/apache2/` | `/var/log/nginx/` or `/var/log/httpd/` |
| **Mail (Postfix)** | `/var/log/mail.log` | `/var/log/maillog` |
| **Package installs** | `/var/log/apt/` and `/var/log/dpkg.log` | `/var/log/dnf.log` |
| **Certificates (certbot)** | `/var/log/letsencrypt/` | the same |

To read a big file without opening all of it: `sudo tail -n 100 /var/log/nginx/error.log` for the end, `sudo tail -f ...` to follow live, and `sudo grep -i error /var/log/syslog | tail` to filter. Old files appear as `.1` or `.gz`; `zgrep` reads the compressed ones.

## Logs do not grow forever (and should not)

The `logrotate` program rotates the files in `/var/log`: it renames the current one, compresses it and deletes the oldest, following the rules in `/etc/logrotate.d/`. Your own applications only join that scheme if you write a rule for them. The systemd journal has a limit of its own, and you can shrink it by hand with `sudo journalctl --vacuum-size=200M` (the value is an example). Logs nobody rotates are the classic reason for a full disk: **what fills the disk**.

**The journal can vanish on a reboot.**
On some systems the journal is kept in memory only and disappears when the server restarts, exactly when you needed it most. If `/var/log/journal` does not exist, the journal is not persistent; the setting is in `/etc/systemd/journald.conf` (option `Storage=persistent`). Depending on your system, check the distribution's documentation.

**Logs hold other people's data.**
IP addresses and user names of the people visiting your site live here. Do not publish them or send them to anyone who does not need them; if you ask for help, cut what is personal. See **personal data protection**.

**When asking for help, paste the 20 or 30 lines around the error,**
not the whole file nor a cropped screenshot. It is what lets the reader work out the cause.

NEED A HAND?

Need us to confirm something on our side, such as the network, the machine or the console, while you read the logs? Write to us.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- A service will not start: reading systemctl status →
- No space left on device: what fills the disk →
- Cron does not run: the usual causes →
- Common VPS and Cloud errors →

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| TAX ID (NIF) | 500 260 5724 |
| COMMERCIAL REGISTRATION NO. | 26464-25/250724 |
| REGISTERED OFFICE | Rua Direita do Patriota, Bairro Dangereux<br>Belas, Luanda, Angola |
| CONTACT | info@interweb.ao · +244 942 011 191 · www.interweb.ao |
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